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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4824

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 02090

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT ADDED PARA 7)

TERREP EXCLUSIVE

E.O.12356: DECL: OADR

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SUBJECT: LIBYAN SUPPORTED TERRORISM

REF: STATE 98378

11. SECRET - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. FOLLOWING IS OUR ASSESSMENT OF THE MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM THREAT OF LIBYAN-SPONSORED TERRORISM IN THE WAKE OF THE MARCH 24-25 EVENTS IN THE GULF OF SIDRA, PER REFTTEL.

13. IN OUR VIEW, QADHAFI'S COFFERS WILL PROBABLY BE EVEN MORE OPEN TO ABU NIDAL AND SOME OF THE DAMASCUS-BASED PALESTINIANS THAN PREVIOUSLY ON ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS IN THE GULF OF SIDRA. WHETHER THESE GROUPS WILL BE MORE LIKELY TO ENGAGE IN TERRORISM FOR THIS REASON IS DIFFICULT TO SAY. THEY HAVE THEIR OWN AGENDA, WOULD OPERATE WITH OR WITHOUT QADHAFI, AND ARE NOT SPECIFICALLY CONCERNED WITH LIBYAN ISSUES SUCH AS THE GULF OF SIDRA PER SE. WE ARE NOT IN A POSITION TO JUDGE WHETHER LIBYANS WILL THEMSELVES BECOME MORE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN TERRORIST ACTIVITIES. QADHAFI IS PROBABLY NOW MOTIVATED TO PAY A HANDSOME PRICE TO HIRED KILLERS TO GET AT AMERICANS, BUT HE WILL PRESUMABLY STILL BE CONCERNED THAT ACCOUNTABILITY NOT BE DIRECTLY TRACEABLE TO HIM.

14. WHEN ABU NIDAL COMMITS HIS NEXT OUTRAGE, WE THINK IT VERY LIKELY HE WILL CITE THE EVENTS IN THE GULF OF SIDRA AS AN EXCUSE. OTHER DAMASCUS-BASED PALESTINIAN GROUPS, MOST OF WHICH DO NOT TARGET U.S. INTERESTS, ARE LESS LIKELY TO DO SO.

15. SYRIA ALLOWS ABU NIDAL TO MAINTAIN A PRESENCE IN SYRIA AND IN SYRIAN-CONTROLLED LEBANON. RECENT PUBLICITY GIVEN TO ITS CONNECTION TO ABU NIDAL HAS BEEN A CAUSE OF SOME EMBARRASSMENT, BUT NOT YET SUFFICIENT TO CAUSE SYRIA TO CLOSE THE DOOR TO ABU NIDAL. HOW MUCH SUPPORT SYRIA GIVES ABU NIDAL IS DIFFICULT TO SAY. THE SYRIAN STYLE IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM QADHAFI'S--MORE SUBTLE, LESS PUBLIC, LESS SELF-CONGRATULATING--AND THE SYRIAN FOCUS IS NARROWER, MORE PURELY LOCAL AND LESS IDEOLOGICAL.

16. AS WAS EVIDENT IN THE MARCH 27 DEMONSTRATION IN DAMASCUS AGAINST AMERICAN ACTIVITIES IN THE GULF OF SIDRA, SYRIAN POLICY IS TO PROTECT U.S. FACILITIES AND PERSONNEL IN SYRIA. SYRIA WANTS TO MAINTAIN DIALOGUE WITH THE U.S. AND DOES NOT PERCEIVE AN INTEREST IN BEING SEEN TO DO HARM AGAINST U.S. INTERESTS HERE. DAMASCUS REMAINS ONE OF THE MORE SECURE CITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST, ALTHOUGH IT TOO HAS SUFFERED FROM TERRORISM (MORE BOMBS HAVE EXPLODED HERE IN THE LAST NINE MONTHS THAN IN AMMAN, FOR EXAMPLE).

17. THERE REMAINS THE POSSIBILITY THAT LIBYA MAY ATTEMPT TO STAGE AN ATTACK AGAINST U.S. PERSONNEL OR FACILITIES IN DAMASCUS WITHOUT SYRIAN KNOWLEDGE OR APPROVAL. THERE ARE TWO FACTORS WHICH MITIGATE THIS: THE VIGILANCE OF THE SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES, AND QADHAFI'S CONCERN ABOUT THE NEGATIVE EFFECT SUCH AN ATTACK WOULD HAVE ON SYRIAN-LIBYAN RELATIONS.

18. EXCEPT FOR SOME CONCERN ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SA-5 SYSTEM, THE SYRIANS PROBABLY DERIVE SATISFACTION FROM THE GULF OF SIDRA INCIDENT. IT BROUGHT ARABS TOGETHER AGAINST THE U.S., DEFLECTED ARAB LEAGUE ATTENTION FROM THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR, AND PRODUCED THE APPEARANCE OF A CLOSER USSR TIE TO THE ARABS. IT WILL NOT MAKE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON ALREADY COOL BILATERAL U.S.-SYRIAN TIES, EXCEPT TO ADD SOMEWHAT TO THE PERCEPTION OF THE U.S. AS ANTI-ARAB.

EAGLETON